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ABSTRACT

This handbook is based on experience with courses in which writing coaches participated, as part of the Program in Humanities at the University of Southern Mississippi. The courses were in the areas of humanities, philosophy, fine arts, and history. The handbook first defines a writing coach as a person who is attached to a class for the purpose of helping students write better. The handbook then presents 26 questions, and answers to these questions, on the writing coach's duties, qualifications, and other aspects of his/her responsibilities. (MS)

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HANDBOOK FOR WRITING COACHES

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Program in Humanities

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Under the sponsorship of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), faculty members in the Program in Humanities at the University of Southern Mississippi have been experimenting for several semesters with ways to improve their students' skills in writing, thinking and learning. Following workshops on writing and teaching writing, and after having been introduced to the concept of writing across the curriculum, several teachers worked out the concept of the writing coach and applied the concept in courses.

This handbook is based on experience with courses in which writing coaches participated. The courses were the following:

Humanities.	Greek Literature and Culture
Humanities.	German Literature
Philosophy.	Philosophy of Man
Humanities.	Spanish Literature
Humanities.	Studies (French Literature and Art)
Fine Arts.	Allied Arts
History.	Renaissance and Reformation
Humanities.	Italian Renaissance

Use of the handbook, and participation of a writing coach in a class, entails three assumptions:

1. The efficacy of a well-planned approach to teaching college writing through process, as for example, Donald Murray's Write to Learn (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1987).

2. The wish of the professor to conduct a class that is relatively student centered as opposed to teacher centered, and in which developmental needs of the students are specifically addressed.

3. The direct relationship of quantity of writing and quality of writing; that is, the assumption that writing more leads to better writing.

A writing coach is a person who is attached to a class for the purpose of helping students write better.

What does a writing coach do?

The coach guides students toward solutions within an established curriculum, as opposed to devising and delivering a curriculum. Students who need teaching should be referred to an appropriate writing course or to a writing laboratory for instruction. The coach helps students at all stages of writing in connection with the course: discovering subjects, development of ideas, research, focus, ordering and planning, drafting, clarification and critique, revision, production, publication.

When does the coaching take place?

The writing coach gives assistance in conference with students (singly or in small groups) and during class, according to the agreement with the professor.

Why have a writing coach?

Students benefit from a writing coach by writing more, writing better, thinking more independently, and mastering more of the course material.

Specifically, how will the class be different if there is a writing coach?

The class should make students write and rewrite more than they would without a coach, so that the final written product will be more polished. The professor will gain an improved view of the students' potential regarding research and thought.

Writing is active. Since it requires students to assimilate and organize material, writing ecourages thinking. Students may therefore want more discussion or "input" into the course than the professor expects. Coaches should not be surprised if the professor remarks that she or he cannot cover as much material as expected because of discussion or questions.

Incorporating more writing and active participation by the students may change the nature of the knowledge being disseminated and generated. If students are asked to produce papers--think and rethink their way through problems, organize information, draw conclusions, etc.--they are simultaneously being asked to generate knowledge, however elementary or uninformed. Knowledge in the class may thus become more diverse and fluid, less authoritative and factual through the activities a coach makes possible.

Although students may gain more active knowledge of the course material, freshmen and sophomores (in particular) may evaluate the professor lower than they otherwise would. Some students will be irritated by the addition of writing assignments and by the demand to think and rethink problems associated with the course material. They may not like the fact that the professor is not the sole source of knowledge.

How does the writing coach get started?

First, the writing coach should meet the professor of the class and secure a syllabus. If the syllabus is to be revised because of the writing coach's participation, an old syllabus will still be useful.

Second, the coach and professor should discuss ground rules (see below), agree on the role of the coach in the class, and bring the syllabus up to date if necessary. A vital element of this meeting is to determine how the writing coach will be introduced at the first class meeting.

Third, the writing coach should attend the first class meeting and speak briefly to the class. The coach should explain the nature of help available and give the particulars of time and place for conferences.

Fourth, the professor should give a writing assignment or allow the coach to initiate a writing activity in class.

What are some good ground rules?

Before the course begins, the professor and writing coach should ask themselves a number of questions and agree on the answers. Insofar as is convenient, the ground rules should be expressed in the course syllabus so that students understand the relationship between the professor and writing coach.

1. <u>What sort of writing does the course specify for students: free writing, summaries, book reports, informal essays, formal essays, writing for oral reports, prospectuses, annotated bibliographies, research papers?</u> Teachers of some courses may never have considered the possibilities for varied kinds of writing, especially writing in preparation for the final "paper," and most particularly the stages in preparing papers with a computer. The writing coach has an opportunity to point out expanded possibilities for student writing.

2. <u>Which style manuals are to be followed?</u> In courses that draw students from a variety of disciplines, the matter of a prescribed style manual looms large. Because students frequently have difficulty modifying the format of computer-generated papers, the degree of flexibility

allowed should be made as clear as possible.

3. Should the writing coach attend classes? Experience indicates that the coach should attend. It is vital that the coach is familiar with the reading material of the class.

4. Should the writing coach participate in the class, adding to discussion, writing in-class exercises, taking part in group or team work? The professor and coach are likely to answer this question negatively before the class and modify their opinion as they gain experience with each other. Obviously the coach must exercise a measure of finesse.

5. Will a class period or a part of one or more periods be turned over to the writing coach? The coach needs some portion of scheduled class time with students. If the teacher must miss a class, students may profit from a period devoted to discussion of writing, free writing, immediate peer review, exercises in brainstorming and focusing, instruction on collecting material, etc.

6. What is the attendance policy regarding student conferences with the writing coach?

7. If there is to be focused free writing in class, who will make the assignments?

What should the professor expect the writing coach to do?

The professor can expect the writing coach to help students write better papers and to encourage thought and research.

In practical terms, the professor should expect the coach to keep consultation hours faithfully, to make periodic reports on students' progress and activities, and to attend class regularly and punctually.

The professor should also expect professional behavior from the writing coach. There can be no gossiping, no covert criticism of content or methodology.

What should the writing coach expect from the professor?

The writing coach should expect very clear communication about expectations in the course. The ground rules should be discussed and followed.

The coach should expect constructive evaluation and criticism.

The coach should expect not to be bypassed. This expectation does not mean that the professor cannot have conferences with students about papers, procedures, research, etc.; but the professor should not exclude the writing coach.

What should students expect from the writing coach?

Students can expect the writing coach to help them produce papers that are better written than the papers would be without a coach.

Students should expect the coach to accept them at their present level of development. The writing coach has no program to impose, only help to offer. Students should expect to be encouraged, never to be "put down."

Students may expect availability and clear communication about when and where to meet.

Students should expect not to be threatened through evaluation. Under normal circumstances, the writing coach gives no grade.

Students should expect the writing coach to help them get better grades by making their learning more active.

Students should expect to have their own perceptions and conclusions taken seriously by the writing coach. They may also expect a thorough and private critique of their thought processes as revealed in their writing.

Because learning with a writing coach tends to be active, students may expect the writing coach to help them remember course material better.

How much of the coach's time is required?

The size of the class is the main determinant. A coach may expect, first of all, to attend classes for the approximately forty hours of class meetings. Conferences with students will number approximately three per student and average fifteen to twenty minutes each. In a class of thirty, the writing coach may, then, expect an additional twenty-five hours of conferences. Reading in preparation for conferences and keeping records will probably require an additional five hours. For a class of thirty, then, the coach may expect seventy hours of effort.

What are the qualifications of a writing coach?

A writing coach should be a good writer. The coach's discipline does not matter, but people in English and education are likely candidates because of their interests.

A writing coach needs to have mastered sentence and paragraph structure and should be able to write a coherent essay. The coach should have already demonstrated an ability to write essays or research papers in at least junior or senior level classes. Just as important, however, are critical reading and sensitivity to other people's writing and their ideas.

A writing coach needs personal maturity sufficient to behave professionally.

A writing coach needs a sense of intellectual adventure. Most probably the writing coach needs to

believe that knowledge is more dynamic than static, and that students can generate knowledge.

How much and what sort of training is required?

Prospective writing coaches who are already familiar with Donald Murray's Write to Learn or with a similar text and who have no instructional experience need a workshop of approximately two and a half days.

The workshop should cover each stage of writing as outlined and discussed in Murray. Participants should develop essays in the workshop and engage in peer criticism. In addition, there should be instruction on conference technique (two hours) and instruction on keeping records (one hour).

Prospective coaches who are not familiar with an appropriate writing text or program should study a recommended text before the workshop. Such study will require approximately six to eight hours.

Where does the writing coach live?

The coach needs a mail box at the very least. An office is ideal, and some coaches will have offices or desk space because of other duties. In the absence of space in an office or conference area, the writing coach may have to find room for conferences in the library or student union.

The possibility to receive telephone calls is equally important.

How does the writing coach participate in in the main events of the class?

The writing coach should collect students' papers if possible. It is easy for the professor to say, for example, that papers are due on a certain date to the writing coach.

The coach should be a visible participant in the class.

The writing coach should control a portion of the class, as agreed in the establishment of ground rules.

How do the coach and professor handle grading and critique of papers?

The writing coach should not grade papers, neither the drafts nor the final product.

Anyone may critique a paper in the process of being written. The professor, the writing coach, and peers may mark draft papers or other forms of preliminary writing; but only the professor should mark final papers for critique and grades.

If the professor wishes to have an opinion or

commentary on a final product, the coach may write remarks or critique on stick-on tabs for the professor. The tabs should be removed from the student's paper before it is returned to the student.

What is the purpose of a conference?

The conference should help students write more and better. Specific objectives relating to this overall goal include the following, which are taken from Muriel Harris's One to One (Urbana: NCTE 1986), pp. 28-34:

1. Attending to the student's concerns. The first concern is to complete the course successfully and, particularly, to complete the writing assignments. Students are also concerned to express their thoughts and ideas. They have a host of small concerns about grammar and punctuation, sentence structure and paragraph organization--all of which appear in their minds as obstacles to both clear expression and good grades.

2. Motivating students. The coach must find features of the student's writing that are good and must offer encouragement to continue writing, revising, and polishing.

3. Helping students become independent writers. Students in conference should learn to be critical readers of their own prose, specifically learn to ask appropriate questions about notes, outlines, drafts, and final products.

4. Encouraging ideas. The coach should listen and, through questions, help the student make connections among ideas and texts.

How are conferences conducted?

Conferences must take place in an atmosphere of trust. There is a good basis for trust and openness because the coach is not an authority figure giving a grade for the course. It will be helpful to remind the student of the situation at the beginning of the conference and at intervals if the student should become defensive or nervous.

What happens in a conference?

The following is based on Harris's remarks, pp. 45-48.

1. Engagement. The coach should gain the student's confidence by asking, for example, "Do you have anything for me to look at today?" At this point there is a

commentary on a final product, the coach may write remarks or critique on stick-on tabs for the professor. The tabs should be removed from the student's paper before it is returned to the student.

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stock taking. The student may have an outline, a draft or just an idea. The student's answer will establish what the student and coach have in common for the duration of conference. It is very helpful for the coach to use "I" in conversation. For example, "I am interested in X. I look forward to learning more about X." "I think X ..."

For this stage of the conference, the coach must be familiar with what the student has read and studied for the course.

2. Identifying the purpose of the meeting. The coach may announce the focus or goal of the conference by saying, "Today I'd like to talk about X." Or the coach may ask the student to provide focus.

3. Motivation. The student should not lose sight of over-all goals. The coach should discuss goals by asking the student what he or she wants to accomplish in the course and in the writing task. Perhaps the student can relate immediate goals of the conference to larger goals of the course or writing task.

4. Exploration of the task. This activity requires analysis to see the steps, aspects, and parts of the writing task. The coach may ask the student to identify aspects that need discussing: concept, research, thesis, lead, logic, etc.

5. Identification of a problem. The coach and student should focus on an aspect of the writing task where improvement is possible. Questions are useful in accomplishing this task. Some examples based on Harris (p. 61, citing D. Murray) are as follow:

> Whom are you writing to? Who are your readers?
> How old are they?
> What would you like to say to your readers?
> Which questions are your readers going to ask you?
> At what point are they going to ask questions?
> Why did you settle on this topic?
> What about this topic do you want to communicate?

6. Agreement to work together on a problem. The coach should try to have the student acknowledge and define the area of focus, and ask if the student is willing to work on it.

7. Task assignment. The coach should articulate what the student must do to satisfy the terms of the agreement. Here comes into play the student's level of cognitive development or maturity. Tasks should be very specific, for example, "Draw a line down the middle of a long page. On the left, list the things you think Achilles does right

and on the right list the things he does wrong." Other specific tasks might be to discuss a topic with a classmate or with a teacher, to perform a research task, to make a list, to look at something, to brainstorm, to prepare or review a bibliography, to summarize a passage or work. The agreement should probably be to perform a task, not to "try," "think about," or otherwise fiddle-faddle.

8. Termination. The end of the meeting should be positive. The coach might say, "I enjoyed talking with you," and remind the student that further help is available.

How much class time is turned over to the writing coach?

A total of about one hundred and fifty minutes of a course should be turned over to the coach. If the professor regularly incorporates writing in class (an ideal situation), the one hundred and fifty minutes may easily be reduced.

One class period can be dedicated to writing and whole-class critique and discussion. If a substantial paper is required, the hour-long session could be held advantageously after drafts have been returned and before the paper is actually due.

An additional forty-five to fifty minutes can be divided into three segments of fifteen minutes. Profitable activities during these sessions are peer review and critique, small-group discussion of the papers in progress, and development of ideas and topics.

The remaining fifty minutes should be broken into three-to-five minute segments for free writing on a topic of the class. Here are some questions and prompts to help students focus on topics for the purpose of writing:

What surprised you about X?
What do you know about X?
What did you find out today about X?
What do you not know about X?
What would you like to know about X?
What do you expect to find out about X?
What do you expect of the film/the reading?
Summarize X.
Make a list of questions about X.
List words especially connected with X.

The writing coach should remind students that free writing is not for a grade.

What gains might be measured regarding content of the course?

The professor of the course may be interested in learning whether the presence of a coach has had an

effect on students' mastery of course content. Appropriate writing ought to result in an advantage in terms of content learned.

Knowledge gained in the course can be documented by simple before and after tests of key items. The amount of knowledge gained because of the activities of the writing coach can be determined through comparison among courses.

What gains might be measured regarding skill at writing?

The writing coach and professor will probably want to know the effect of coaching on students' writing, and the writing coach can easily maintain records to determine some of that effect.

An assumption of this handbook is that more writing leads to better writing. The writing coach can measure quantity in two ways: amount of writing and speed (or ease) of writing. If students keep notebooks that include all preliminary writing, the writing coach will have at hand the evidence of quantity. If students do not keep notebooks, the writing coach can take records from conferences and inspection of in-class writing.

Speed is a measurable aspect of fluency. A convenient and effective way to measure speed is to give in-class writing assignments that last three to five minutes. Students count the number of words and divide by the number of minutes, thus obtaining a measure of words per minute. As the school term progresses, the number of words per minute should increase dramatically, although perhaps not steadily or uniformly. Many students will be pleased with this exercise because it gives them evidence of progress.

Gains in the quality of writing can be determined by grading papers within the class and comparing those written early in the course with those written late in the course. (The writing coach does not grade papers, but the professor may wish to grade papers and maintain records or to consult with professional evaluators.) Another basis for determining quality is to compare finished papers from a class with a writing coach to similar papers from a class without a writing coach.

How can gains in independent thinking be measured?

The writing coach encourages writing by stages. Such writing, in turn, requires students to rethink their ideas, concepts, and values. The writing coach can be a sympathetic sounding board for students and will thus encourage some students to think.

Independent thinking (or its absence) will be evident in finished papers. The professor of the class should be able to determine whether a student has thought independently about the course material.

A second way to measure thinking is to ask the

students to assess the degree and sort of thinking accomplished in the class as compared with the degree of thinking for similar classes without a writing coach,

What are the affective results that might be measured?

Some students will gain self-esteem because their writing will look better in the final product and because they will have had a chance to develop their own ideas through a systematic process. Students' confidence can be noted by observation of their participation in discussions, their willingness to express ideas, and their capacity to listen to the ideas of others. Questionnaires can elicit information about students' own perceptions of their progress in such areas as self-discipline, locus of control, motivation, self-confidence, and ability to plan.

A possible indicator of positive changes is the pattern of drop-out and retention in the class as compared to other classes.

NOTE TO READERS: Because the use of writing coaches is still experimental, the authors of this booklet would appreciate hearing from colleagues who teach with coaches or serve as coaches.